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ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AS DETERMINED BY METHOD AND SELECTION

By HARLAN I. SMITH

ARCHEOLOGICAL evidence, particularly such as is contained in specimens and illustrations, is, no doubt, often handled in such a way that it is very misleading as a basis for the reconstruction of prehistoric ethnology. This is, of course, not because of any conscious attempt to mislead but because of the particular methods of making the collections, and, in some cases, because of the practical selection of illustrations.

A collection made by a farmer's boy differs from one made by a man trained in archeological technique; one obtained by excavation from another collected from the surface. The collection gathered by a connoisseur differs from the collection made by the scientist who endeavors to obtain, in an unprejudiced and disinterested manner, the evidence, the whole evidence, and nothing but the evidence. Archeological material, being necessarily fragmentary, readily lends itself to misleading reconstruction. The selection of unique specimens for exhibition in a museum or for illustration, side by side with common objects, leads to misunderstanding unless the label or the text is carefully read. A unique specimen may be a sport, and single finds must be considered as possibly unique until duplicated. Collections from single or special sites may also be misleading.

A collection such as is made by a farmer's boy from the surface of the ground, for instance in the Ohio Valley, will probably contain many arrow points chipped from stone, a few celts pecked from stone, some grooved axes, and perhaps a perforated slate tablet, with but few other objects. One made by an experienced archeologist on the surface in the same region will also include fragments of pottery. The average farmer's boy discards these because they are broken, or because he does not recognize the potsherds as objects of human handiwork. Sometimes he even believes them to be pieces of petrified bark.

If the archeologist makes his collection, not only from the surface, but also by excavating into such places as mounds, graves, and village sites, his collection will contain relatively few arrow-points, celts, grooved axes, and the like. It will include a large number and a great variety of objects made of bone, many of antler, and not a few of shell. There will also be fragments of pottery. The reason that a collection made from the surface by both the boy and the archeologist, contains proportionately more arrow-points than the one made by the archeologist in excavating, is no doubt partly because these objects are more easily seen on the surface of a field which has been washed by the rains of a season than they are in an excavation where they are partly covered with earth dust. The reason that the objects of bone, antler, and shell are found in excavating is that in the ground they are protected from the sun and rain. Such of them as have been left upon the surface or are brought to the surface by the burrowing of animals, the cultivation of fields, and the like, are soon cracked by the sun and frost, broken by the tread of man and beast, and finally wholly disintegrated. Possibly such objects are more easily discovered in the excavations than the arrow-points, because of their average lighter color. Celts and grooved axes are probably rare in the excavations, because they are relatively rare everywhere, and they are found in undue proportion on the surface because there all, or nearly all, the objects of bone, antler, and shell have been eliminated.

The collection gathered by a lover of specimens as such often contains art treasures, objects made of precious or semi-precious material, unique, ceremonial, or mysterious things. Usually there are few or no examples of raw materials, objects in process of manufacture, broken or repaired artifacts, or the common things which are more illustrative of the life of the prehistoric people under investigation than are the "gems" or monstrosities of the collection.

The collection made by a scientist should be obtained with an endeavor to understand the whole life of the people, and in it the unique pieces, perhaps formerly owned by a chief or shaman, bear a true relation in numbers to the common manufactures of the whole people. Such a collection may be likened to a merchant's store of goods after he has taken his inventory and replenished his stock by filling up the gaps. Even this collection sometimes falls short for at least two reasons. The archeologist, being human, often runs into a rut and, becoming unconscious of his special interests, collects certain things at the expense of others. Moreover, he is able to obtain only those things which do not disintegrate, and what remains also requires laborious repairing and restoration. These remnants must always fail to present evidence as satisfactorily as a collection from a living people, none of whose manufactures are as yet decayed, and whose physique, language, and philosophy are all available for study.

The illustrations of archeological objects, such as are published in a report where an endeavor is made to show all the forms of a region, give a false impression as to their relative abundance. A unique specimen of course must be figured, whereas there is no need of going to the expense of figuring duplicates of the more common objects, although several specimens may be used to show the range of size and individual variations. Nevertheless a unique object has a visual presentation far greater than its relative abundance warrants. This is a practical problem due to the expense of making and printing illustrations. Any false idea gained by glancing at the illustrations and neglecting the text can be corrected only by carefully reading the latter.

The same general idea holds good in regard to museum exhibits. There is a practical difficulty in the way of exhibiting a very great number of exact duplicates. No one would retire a unique specimen although exhibited together with only three or four common specimens, for fear that it would give the impression that there was one of these to every three or four of the others, even though the real proportion might be one to ten thousand. There are practical reasons for the method of selecting illustrations and specimens for exhibition, but in carrying on investigation one must also take into consideration facts not shown by the museum exhibits or the illustrations.

A unique specimen may be the single great production of a great artist, or it may be only the offspring of an idle moment, made without serious consideration and perhaps by an abnormal individual—a mere freak, unworthy of consideration in the study of native craftsmanship. If, in making a collection in the field, we are satisfied to end our search for each kind of object as soon as one example is secured, it will never be known whether such an object is the common everyday tool of the people, or a freak, or again the unique product of a master hand.

A collection from a single or peculiar site may lead to an entirely erroneous conclusion if one is satisfied with the results obtained in this one kind of place. For instance, objects from a grave—which may be that of a man, woman, or an infant—may be both characteristic only of grave finds, not typical of the whole culture of the people, and also peculiar to males, females, or infants as the case may be. Again collections from the part of a village site near the water do not permit us to generalize with regard to the life of the people. The objects found in such a peculiar site may have been the property of a certain peculiar type of individual—a potter, metal-worker, or shaman—or of a class of individuals—fishermen, women, or children. It may be that the children always played in that part of the village, and that these objects were used only by the children. A collection made a few miles away might give one a widely different impression of the same material culture. A collection from one of our own fishing villages would give one idea of American life; another from a rural village, even if only a short distance away, would give an entirely different conception of the culture of our people as a whole. By keeping these, among many other points, constantly in mind, the archeologist may contribute much more in reconstructing prehistoric ethnology than otherwise would be the case, and his contributions become by no means unimportant in a study of the laws governing human development.

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